THE ROMANCE OF HUNTING ORCHIDS

Strange Perils and Risks of Gathering These Odd Flowers

By WILLIAM GEORGE FITZ-GERALD

A Consignment of Orchids on the Magdalena River.

Lælia Gouldiana

Lælia Anceps

AS old as the law of supply and demand itself is the motive that forces the orchid-hunter into almost impenetrable tropical forests where these gorgeous floral parasites make the tree-tops blaze and lure the hunter-scientist too often to his death. The element of gambling is in it too, for no man may say, on receiving a scrap of Odontoglossum, whether it will turn out to be worth seventy-five cents or a thousand dollars. But as long as a Rothschild or a Chamberlain is willing to put down fabulous sums for an odd bloom, the orchid-hunters will risk their lives in the wilds of New-Guinea or Borneo or reeking Amazon-swamps.

It does not require much research or inquiry to trace this fascinating scientific hobby of the rich to the quaint old cathedral city of Saint Albans, not far from London. It is here that one will find Frederick Sander, who maintains a large staff of collectors in some of the wildest regions of the world, including Madagascar, the lower slopes of the Himalayas, Ecuador, Central Brazil and the interior of Assam. Here too one finds a vast establishment under glass where ship-loads of these most curious plants are received, reared and interbred or hybridized with results that seem almost incredible. In one house by some beautiful little lakes in which goldfish darted furtively, the thermometer ran up to eighty and even ninety. "You must imagine you are in Borneo now," Sander said; "whereas in the next house you will find the temperature only fifty-five degrees, because the orchids there come from the highlands of Mexico and the passes of the Andes."

And indeed these delicate and fantastic exotics were being catered for in every particular of their exigent needs. If they needed moss from almost untrodden morasses of Sumatra and Java, here it was. If they fed only upon the air and threw out feeling roots upward instead of downward, that air was impregnated with the fumes of tobacco in order to reproduce other conditions. Generally speaking, orchids are epiphytic—that is to say, they live on the air alone, while only a few of them are terrestrial and grow in soil.

In some of the wildest and remote regions of the earth Sander maintains fifteen or twenty travelers, many of whom have been graduated from the great Horticultural Laboratory at Kew Gardens. Their richest fields are Mexico, Venezuela, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Colombia, Brazil, Burma, Assam and the Himalayas generally, Peru, Borneo, New-Guinea and the Dutch Indies. On the business side the work is purely speculative. A successful orchid-hunter may cost his employer fifteen thousand a year, and there is absolutely no check upon his work, no minimum number of plants which he may send home. A man is not blamed if he does not send home a single orchid in the twelve months. "Last season," remarked Sander to me, "I lost sixty-five hundred dollars on one man and four thousand on another."

The orchid-hunters work from a certain base. A man about to collect on the lower Himalayan spurs will go direct to Calcutta, where he will cash his draft, purchase his outfit, engage servants and porters, etc. When he reaches the primeval jungle he puts up huts and builds a kind of rude bungalow for himself with a broad veranda in front where his orchids may be laid out, dried and prepared for the journey.

For, difficult as it is to find rare orchids at all, the trouble only begins when the hunter discovers them. He must pack and prepare them for transportation by coolie in Assam, by long-necked llama in the Andes, by raft or elephant, and contrive to get them thousands of miles across the ocean in such a condition that at least twenty per cent. of them will arrive with some vitality in them. And yet ten thousand plants may be collected on some remote Andean peak or Papuan jungle with infinite care, and consigned to Europe, the freight alone amounting to thousands of dollars, yet on arrival there may not be a single orchid left alive.

When the orchids are brought in they are dried for perhaps four weeks and then prepared for their long journey. When entirely free from moisture, they are fastened to tough twigs and most carefully packed in wooden cases with a liberal air allowance. These boxes are then carried by various means to local agents who see them safely on board the steamers.

At this early stage does the great orchid gamble begin; for if the plants have not enough air, if they are placed on board too near the boilers, or exposed to sunlight, they will all be ruined. So delicate are they that in Colombia certain *crispums* grow only at one precise level. They cannot exist higher up because of the cold, and the intense heat of the valleys would utterly kill this particular kind.

Sander probably receives two million plants a year; and so great is the uncertainty about them that they are mostly sold by auction. One plant may be worth fifty cents, but may produce a freakish flower (the cause of which is unknown), whereupon the plant is promptly divided and each piece may bring a thousand dollars.

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"On July 24, 1883," Sander remarked to me, "a certain Mr. Harvey, an attorney of Liverpool, was strolling with me through this very house in which we now are, when he suddenly stooped over a plant of *Lælia anceps* which had a ring-mark on its pseudobulb much higher up than was usual. He bought it then and there for twelve dollars, and on December 1, 1888, sold it back to me for one thousand dollars."

On another occasion a large consignment of *Cypripedium insigne* arrived at Saint Albans, and Sander himself noticed among them one with a bright yellow flower-stalk instead of the normal brown of the type. He put it on one side, and when it flowered the bloom was a burst of glorious gold—a freakish novelty of a splendid kind. Sander had the plant cut in two, and sold one-half for five hundred and twenty-five dollars at public auction and the other half for the same sum to a wealthy private collector. The latter, when his plant had grown, divided this also, sold two pieces at five hundred dollars each, and a third section Sander himself bought back for thirteen hundred dollars for the purpose of hybridizing.

Orchid enthusiasts well remember the rich find of the gorgeous elephant moth dendrobe, named after Baron Schroeder. The weird flowers of this variety alternate from the richest crimson through paler shades to almost pure white, and look like gigantic nodding moths on the slender stems—just as the lovely colibri orchids have assumed the shapes of exquisite humming-birds hovering in the sweet West Indian morning.

Some years ago the elephant moth dendrobe was almost beyond price, but an enthusiastic collector voyaging up the malarial and deadly Fly River in British New-Guinea suddenly came upon glorious masses of it in a sacred cemetery of the cannibal Papuans, where the huge crimson floral moths crept and curled strangely amid the bones and skulls. The natives threatened the orchid-hunter with their poisoned spears, fearing this disturbance of their ancestors' remains. They were won over, however, by presents of brass wire and calico, and still more by the performance of a few conjuring tricks and a little medical attendance.

The collector was finally assisted by the savages in gathering the new orchid; but they insisted on sending with the plants a certain quaint little god, probably in order to propitiate the spirits of the dead in case they should resent this rude intrusion. This idol was sold with the first consignment of the plants at the auction rooms of Protheroe & Morris, in Cheapside, London. The specimen that attracted most attention, however, was one growing out of the eye-socket of a human skull. This was purchased *in situ* as a curiosity, and realized six hundred dollars.

A resident of the German Colony at Tovar, New-Granada, sent an almost unique plant of the *Masdevallia Tovarensis* to a business friend in Manchester who, when it flowered, cut it up and sold fragments for large sums. Each purchaser did the same thing in due time with his section, and in this way a kind of conventional price of five dollars a leaf was established for the plant. The Saint Albans people got on its track, however, and commissioned their man Arnold to take the next steamer for La Guayra and Caracas. A few months later a consignment of forty thousand plants was received in England, which drove the price down from five dollars a leaf to twenty-five cents.

"Among my collectors who have at various times died in harness," Sander said to me, "I remember Falkenberg at Panama, Klaboch in Mexico, Endres on the Rio Hacha, Wallace in Ecuador, Schroder in Sierra Leone on the West Coast of Africa, poor Arnold on the Orinoco, Digance in Brazil, and Brown in Madagascar. All these have met more or less tragic deaths through wild beasts, savages, fever, drowning, falls or other accidents.

"But the most sensational story was related to me by the eminent orchid-grower and hunter, Leon Humblot. Some years ago Humblot, a Frenchman, found himself dining at Tamatave in Madagascar in company with his brother and six fellow-countrymen, who were all exploring the then little-known country with various scientific aims. But before the year was out Humblot was the only survivor of them all. One of his colleagues was collecting bugs and beetles for Cutler the naturalist of Bloomsbury, London, and took up butterflies, birds and orchids as a kind of side-line. Unfortunately one day he planted a charge of small shot into a native idol, whereupon the outraged priests soaked him in oil and burned him alive."

But perhaps the most romantic story of all is that related by Forstermann, whose name will ever be associated with the *Cypripedium Spicerianum*. Its annals open in 1878, when a certain Mrs. Spicer living at Wimbledon, a suburb of London, sold the Veitches, well-known florists of Chelsea, a strange lovely flower that had made its appearance in her greenhouse for three hundred and fifty dollars. The florists divided their specimen and sold

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